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ABSTRACT

Nassau Community College (NCC) offers a grammar course as a humanities option that may be taken instead of a literature course. The approach to the course incorporates reader-response theory, feminist criticism, new historicism, and journal writing as the key means for enabling students to learn. Each student has a notebook divided into sections representing different areas of grammar. The first section focuses on grammar as presented by the course text, called "grammar a" for "acceptable." Students formulate grammar rules by providing a sentence which illustrates the rules they have uncovered in their text. The second section is for grammar as presented in literary texts. Students are asked to describe how they feel about the literary works they read on one side of the page, while summarizing the pieces and analyzing their grammar on the other side. Students quickly realize that some very good writers do not follow all of the rules of "grammar a." The third section is for student's own grammar, called "grammar p" for "personal." For this section, students create their own texts through free-writing, and analyze the extent to which they have followed or not followed specific rules of grammar. The fourth section is devoted to grammar found in the everyday world. For this section, "MS. Magazine" serves as the principal text, but students also copy sentences they hear on the street into their notebooks and study the use of grammar in newspapers. Examples of everyday grammar are compared with examples showing grammar rules from the textbook. The fifth part of the journal is used to record due dates. The course emphasizes the historical and sociological bases of grammar. Students are graded on the basis of their journal and how well it reflects their awareness of grammar choices. (JMC)

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Teaching Grammar as a Humanities Course.

by Bernice W. Kliman

Nassau Community College, Garden City, N.Y.
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Note: This paper was written for the 1985 Community College Humanities Association
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Teaching Grammar As a Humanities Course A Paper Written for the 1985 CCHA Institute Contemporary Literary Criticism and the Core Literature Course

Nassau Community College offers a grammar course that may be taken instead of a literature course. Most students must take two semesters of freshman composition, then two additional semesters of English, neither of which need be literature. One can be even be oral communication, which is not an English course; the other can be technical writing, advanced composition, linguistics, journalism, executive writing or grammar. A student who chose from these options would leave NCC with only a one-semester introduction to literature, the second semester of the composition sequence. At first glance, it seems that a grammar course has little to do with literature, still less to do with contemporary literary criticism. But since I was not teaching a literature course that first semester after participating in the CCHA Institute on Contemporary Literary Criticism and the Core Literature Course, it was natural for me to adapt the ideas I had learned at the Institute to the grammar course, which I had never taught before. The critical modes discussed in the Institute—reader-response theory, feminist criticism, new historicism—entered into virtually every lesson I taught. Moreover, the idea of the journal—recommended and discussed by fellow instituters at some of our evening presentations—became the key means for enabling the students to learn.

The very first thing I demonstrated to students was that they already "knew" grammar, even if they couldn't formulate the rules. I put a phrase on the board out of order and asked them to write it correctly: Girls, French, The, Young, Four. Everyone got it right. I used several more examples; no one in the class had any doubt about the order of the words. What told them was the grammar that is in their heads, that is, the patterns of language that they had developed by the time they were five. Then I gave them an article I had enjoyed reading (from which I had derived the preceding exercise) and talked with them about its implications. The article, by Patrick Hartwell ("Grammar, Grammars, and the Teaching of Grammar" in *College English* 47.2 [Feb. 1985]: 105-27) asserted that grammar could not be taught effectively, that giving students opportunities to use language in many ways was more effective than drill. I told them that this article was a guide for me in my teaching of the course. The purpose of the course was to introduce to them resources for discovering grammar acceptable in the most difficult real-life situations in which they might find themselves so that they could make a reasoned decision when they wanted to turn to a grammar that was perhaps different from their native one.

Keeping a journal was the central method for giving students an opportunity to learn the concepts of grammar. Students were to purchase a notebook that could be divided into at least four parts, preferably five. Each part represented an area of grammar that we were going to study: the first was the grammar presented by a text, which we called "grammar a" ("a" for "acceptable"), in this case *English 3200* (Joseph C. Blumenthal, 3rd college edition [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981]), a programmed text. The second was grammar in literary texts, "grammar l," for which we used *A Writer's Reader* (Donald Hall and D. L. Emblen, 4th edition [Boston: Little, Brown, 1985]). The third was our own grammar, "grammar p" ("p" for "person- al") for which we created texts through free-writing. And the fourth was grammar in the everyday world, "grammar w," for which our principal text was *MS. magazine*, distributed free to students through a grant awarded to the magazine. The fifth part of the journal could be used to record assignment due dates, etc., but our work was very structured: each week, the students were to cover one of the twelve units in *English 3200*. Then they were to do the other sections of their notebooks, concentrating on the techniques and issues raised by that unit. I collected journals four times during the semester, grading each section separately.

For each part of the notebook, there were a number of tasks. For example, for part 1, the 3200 part, they were to illustrate on the right side of the page the rules that they uncovered. I had chosen a programmed text to force them to think about the rules, to extract them from language in use. A main idea of the course was that the responsibility for learning lay with students, not with the instructor; the programmed text gave them the ability to teach themselves. They formulated the grammar rules by providing a sentence— not copied from the book but modeled on sentences from the book— which illustrated the rule. For example, if the text said that coordinating conjunctions such as "and," "but" and "or" can connect two nouns or pronouns for a compound subject, two verbs or verb phrases for a compound predicate, and two balanced clauses for a compound sentence, they could illustrate this rule with a sentence such as "John and Jill ate and drank heartily, but George and Joan picked at and left their food." On the left side of the page, I asked them to write questions, comments, definitions and rules. They soon saw that the sentences in 3200, and even their own sentences were somewhat creaky; they didn't seem like sentences in the real world. I did urge them to have a good time writing their sentences, to use their imaginations, to create wild and funny examples that would make them chuckle as they composed them and would make us smile when they were read in class. Nevertheless, their sentences left something to be desired.

For a more realistic view of grammar in action, we turned to the practice of excellent writers in the real world. Here reader-response theory entered in. I introduced the ideas of Louise Rosenblatt, who spoke to us at the CCHA Institute about the different uses of literature, the aesthetic and the efferent, or factual use. Though we were making use of literature, I also

wanted the students to respond to the works aesthetically. Thus, I had the students to look at each literary piece in those two ways. In the second part of their notebooks, on the left side of the page, I asked them to write how they felt about the piece assigned, to free associate. Responses in general were stiff and judgmental. I tried— mostly through my own example rather than through prescription— to urge them toward freer responses, grounded in observations. (I did every part of the notebook just as they did, and when they read from their notebooks in class, so did I.) On the right I asked them to summarize the piece and to analyze its grammar, looking especially for examples that had something to do with the unit in 3200. For example, if the grammar text had been covering present participals, that's what we looked for. In this way students had a opportunity to see what some very good writers actually do. Quickly they saw that many writers do not follow all the rules as laid down by 3200. As we talked about these discrepancies, they began to realize, and I insisted in fact, that they had a choice of grammars, and that making a choice was a political and an aesthetic decision. I let them see how much I enjoyed this work of response and analysis, how much it led me into the heart of the writer's language. They began to see that their response to the work was shaped by the way the writer used language.

Many of the pieces in *A Writer's Reader* are particularly suitable for our purpose. "The Gettysburg Address" provides wonderful examples of parallel structure, and recognizing the elegance of parallel structure was one of the lessons that everyone in the class learned, as their own writing demonstrated. Andrew Marvell's first sentence in "To His Coy Mistress," illustrated a form of subordinate clause without a conjunction that they had seen theoretically discussed and mechanically illustrated in 3200. The rest of the poem showed them some of the changing features of language. George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" was a revelation to them because they could not, at first at least, comprehend either the jargon Orwell deplores or the simple Biblical prose that he praises. Langston Hughes' poems gave them some insight into the purposeful use of dialect. They saw in his prose piece "Feet Live Their Own Life" that Hughes creates two speakers, one whose grammar is that of 3200, the other whose grammar is of, as another text euphemistically puts it, "the neighborhood." They also saw that the latter character has more life, energy and attractiveness than the former. *A Writer's Reader* is excellent because so many of the selections are about language.

Just as students created sentences modeled on those in 3200, so did they, mostly in class as a group, create sentences modeled on those in *A Writer's Reader*. How proud we could be of some of our creations! We had to recognize the grammatical forms and re-create them; we didn't have to know their names. Here, for example, is our sentence modeled on William Stafford's in "A Way of Writing," which describes freewriting (372-77):

Class: A teacher is not so much someone who has something to impart as she is someone who has found a process that will bring about new ideas in her mind and in the minds of students that she and they would not have thought of if she hadn't started to impart something. That is, she does not draw on a reservoir; instead, she engages in an activity that brings to her and her students a whole succession of unforeseen ideas, examples, descriptions, connections, or—but wait!

William Stafford: A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them. That is, he does not draw on a reservoir; instead, he engages in an activity that brings to him a whole succession of unforeseen stories, poems, essays, plays, laws, philosophies, religions, or—but wait!

The third part of the notebooks gave them an opportunity to see what they themselves did in their writing. They were to freewrite on the left side of the page, then, on the right, discuss the rules they did and did not follow. They could also comment on their writing, but I tried to persuade them not to judge it. Rather, I suggested that they observe. Again, each week's work in this section correlated with the unit in 3200. If the unit were on subordination and they didn't find much subordination in their writing or they didn't find much variety in kinds of subordination, then I asked them to concentrate on using those forms in their second freewriting for the unit. They were to do at least two freewrites for each unit. I sometimes had them work in groups on the grammatical (not evaluative) analysis of their free writing, that is, having students read their work to two or three classmates and having the classmates try to observe the grammatical forms operating in the freewrite. I asked them write fables (as described in Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen, *Beat not the Poor Desk: Writing: What to Teach, How to Teach It, and Why* [Montclair, New Jersey: Boynton Cook, 1982], 11-26). These enabled them to learn punctuation for dialogue, allowed them to use dialect, to create characters with widely different grammatical backgrounds, and to formulate their own elegant morals. When I teach this course again, I plan to direct the freewriting to include more varied kinds of writing. Persuasive writing, for example, should highlight grammatical forms other than those found in the narrative writing that most students choose for freewriting.

The fourth part of the notebook was often the most fun and the most controversial— on grammar in the everyday world. Students heard what people said on the streets and copied sentences in their notebooks. The most surprising examples, to me, came from *The New York Times*, where repeatedly we discovered subordinate clauses presented as complete sentences ("Which is not surprising, considering the fact that "Young Sherlock Holmes" is the latest picture from Mr. Spielberg's company, Amblin Entertainment, and that he himself served as the executive producer." [1 Dec. 1985, II:1]) and conjunctive adverbs connecting clauses with commas ("Goat cheese ravioli is so ubiquitous these days that I see it in my dreams, however Mr. Walsh's version cannot be diminished for that." [15 Nov. 1985: C18] and "Stolypin is reviving Russia, therefore, it's bad for the Jews." [13 Nov. 1985: C21]).

We could notice anything at all from anywhere for this unit, but our main source was *MS*. On the left side in the notebooks, students were to paste or copy in examples and on the right they were to compare the examples with the rules in *3200*. They found discrepancies, especially in advertisements. But they eventually learned that ads violated only some rules and not others, that what had seemed at first to be chaotic grammatically actually has its own rules. Like literary writers, the ad writers usually violated "grammar a" for an effect that the students could infer.

Since we were using *Ms.*, feminist ideas were frequently in the content of the articles we were reading. There was one, for example, on non-sexist pronouns (Marie Shear, "Solving the Great Pronoun Debate," *Ms.*, October 1985: 106-109). Generally, students at NCC, men and women, resist feminist ideas, and this class was no exception. I spoke strongly in favor of non-sexist pronouns as a political decision—probably too strongly. They demurred. They also declared that in my own speech I violated the code I was promulgating in class. I could then point out that the grammar structures one learns early in life are used so unconsciously that one has to make a real effort to change these patterns. Blumenthal gave students comfort, for he contradicted what Shear and I said; his pronouncements on pronouns show him to be aware of but insensitive to feminist concerns. He says, "The expressions *he or she* and *his or her* are awkward," and then he provides example after example for which the "correct" answer is "he" for a person who could be of either sex. I have decided to use the text again, however, because it gives a class an opportunity to see a grammatical disagreement in action, to understand how political grammar can be. In this case, students had three "authorities" from whom to choose: Blumenthal, Shear and me.

Another article from *Ms.*, that was helpful was "Finding Celie's Voice" by Alice Walker (December 1985: 71-72, 96). Her point is that we cannot change "the sound of our ancestors" without losing something vital. At the same time, her writing in this piece hardly echoes with

the sound of her ancestors. While Shear's and Walker's articles directly addressed grammatical issues important to us, almost any article was useful for our purposes.

The main Institute idea that informed the course was Brook Thomas' on choice. (Thomas led the final week's session on new historicism.) Students—and most people—think they are free. By showing them how un-free they actually are, we can help them to be as truly free as they might be. One's own grammar, the way one structures language to communicate, is a very important part of expressing both the non-freedom and the freedom. I brought in the letters of Vanzetti, whose grammar was not grammar a, but whose grasp of rhetoric was excellent. What he said moved people everywhere, and his words are still capable of stirring emotions today. Though he was executed, his words, as he said, give his life meaning. I brought in a young man's job-application letter (given to me by the personnel manager of a local firm) whose grammar was also not grammar a, and who earned derision rather than the position he sought. Purpose and audience affect choice. To demonstrate further to them the historical and sociological bases of grammar, I will in the future introduce grammar rules from old textbooks, rules that are certainly not in force now. Examples from early literature can also demonstrate the changing nature of grammar.

I graded the students on the basis of their journals. I did not expect them to memorize the rules of grammar, but I showed them where to discover them if they needed them. I did expect them to be aware of the choices that they could make, and the consequences of those choices. I gave one test, the final from 3200, which I graded but did not count. (Using 3200's test books, they were to test themselves on each unit; I provided the answers.) Many did not pass the final test, but I think that had I told them in advance I would count the test they would have crammed, memorized and passed it. But would that have affected their choices in grammar in the future? I think not. Their grade on the test demonstrated to them the state of their grammar vis a vis grammar a, and thus alerted them to the necessity for looking up the rules whenever they truly need grammar a. Many of the rules that they didn't learn, however, are of little use to them, particularly rules having to do with the proper nomenclature for forms. Do they really need to know the difference between an adverb clause and a noun clause, so long as they can use each in their writing?

The course, I think, taught them important things: That there is no one right way; that language changes; that prescriptive rules in grammar texts are generally a bit behind the practice of the best writers; that many writers and speakers in the world do not (or cannot) use "grammar a," but that many of them suffer ill effects from this disuse; that collaborative efforts can save one when one needs "grammar a"—in other words, that friends or experts can be asked to help one edit his or her work. Above all, the Institute on Contemporary Literary Criticism helped me to shape a course that teaches students responsibility for making

decisions about their own language. Because the course achieved the goals that I set, I'm delighted with it— though I don't know what a linguist would make of it. Reader-responsive, feminist, new historicist— my grammar course is a humanities course, a study of humankind at its most human— using language.